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The Dear Old Lady
Of Eighty-sixth Street

The Dear Old Lady Of Eighty-sixth Street

A Memoir Of
Laura Skeel Pomeroy
Obit., August 23rd, 1911

Shaemas O'Sheal
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Dedicated to
Miss Edith Lloyd Honigman
*Who devotedly served our departed friend
in her last days, and is keeping her memory
green by a revival of the Little Salon of
Eighty-sixth Street*

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Shamma: O Sheel

THE DEAR OLD LADY
OF EIGHTY-SIXTH STREET

The Dear Old Lady of Eighty-sixth Street is dead. Someone clipped an obituary notice and sent it to me; belated; and the frail mortality of that rarest spirit had been returned to earth many days before I knew it.

I would not have felt the irrevocability of it so keenly had I known she was dying, had I been able to serve her in any slight way in those hours when her eyes were taking leave of the light. Yet in a general way I had known that she was going. She had moved from the scene of her long benefaction to a distant quarter of the Bronx; and before that she had been forced to yield her frailty to a wheel-chair, and give over the brave effort of the daily walk. Her deafness, her failures of memory, had grown on her, too, so that toward the last of her residence in Eighty-sixth Street, fewer and fewer had gathered about her on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Slowly, softly, one might say healthily, she had fallen away. It was indeed the expected which was told in this obituary-clipping; and the shock I received was rather from the realization of how long I had neglected visiting her, kept away by the affairs which life heaps upon one illimitably, than from any surprise at the event. I had even spoken with others of "her children" about the

apparent imminence of her departure, and it was remarkable that none of us felt truly sad in that thought, but felt rather that the close of her earthly life would but round out with a sweet faint note that melody which her life had been, that rare pure song.

Mrs. Laura Skeel Pomeroy, the obituary named her in full; said she was 78 years old; and the widow of Walter H. Pomeroy, "a Greek scholar and literary critic." In each of these details there was addition to my knowledge of her, tho I had known her four years; but I never thought of questioning or inquiring about her. The sense of a wholly genuine, wholly satisfactory personality is so rare that I for one let my heart rest in it with a grateful content. I had not even known that she was "herself a sculptor and artist"; it was enough to know her in the role of which this inch-and-a-half obituary speaks thus in conclusion: "For more than twenty years Mrs. Pomeroy had one of the few salons in New York."

So summary, so brief a sentence, exhausts the news-value of this woman's life-work! Let us not quarrel with this, nor the fact that a murder, a divorce, a malfeasance in public office, would be of ten, one hundred, one thousand times greater value by the newspaper standard. Rather let me, one of the least of her protégés, attempt, in my love and reverence, to indicate the unique value of her life, to explain a work that seems to me more beautiful than most, more important than many of the loud-trumpeted benefactions of spectacular philanthropists, and worthy of note beside the applauded achievements of politicians and statesmen; to trace somewhat the influence that sprang from this little old lady wide-spreading and abundant as the fruit of a single apple-seed, incalculable, not obvious to the general eye, but real, most real and true; an influence which consisted of subtle impressions on human spirits, and must therefore be vital, part of life

itself — part of this American life now struggling from Chaos to Achievement.

Twenty years, says the obituary; of which I knew some four. The ground floor apartment of Number 202 West Eighty-sixth Street, within hearing of New York's main throbbing artery, Broadway; peaceful enough, for New York; amid the assured if not always artistic comfort of the Upper West Side; near the beautiful Riverside; and most convenient to the subway; there she lived; thereto we went on Wednesday evenings, and some of us also on Sunday afternoons. Who were *we*? That is not to be answered briefly; for, generally speaking, we were likely enough to include anybody at all who had even a single interest in life beyond bread-and-butter. Greater diversity never was in any salon; and as to numbers, I believe I would be astonished, in spite of my knowledge of the case, if the Recording Angel could show me a summary of those weekly gatherings. Yes, it would be a record impressive as to numbers alone; but how astonishing it would be on the side of personalities, diversities, incongruities! — tho all incongruities gently blended in the benign presence of the Dear Old Lady. And all this was unknown to the newspapers, to all the public prints, and to the great general public itself; and all this was here in New York — in the city of loudness, this quiet shrine; in the city of selfishness, this place where the heart was washed with white hands! Wonderful, when you stop to think of it!

Consider the stream that flowed hither; sometimes a mere handful, sometimes a company that crowded the little parlors uncomfortably, and flowed-over into the halls; scores in number. I will name no names, for memory might play me false and cause omissions which would put the account out of proportion. But as to kind: there were painters, sculptors,

decorators, illustrators; there were poets and story-writers; there were composers, players of all instruments, singers; reciters and actors; professionals living by the arts, amateurs and dilettanti, students galore; there were Hindu Swamis, Christian clergymen, devotees of the "New Thought", atheists, Catholics, Jews; there were generally sufficient representatives of the tribe of willing entertainers, grave and gay, acceptable and difficult to accept; and there were the silent ones, whose talent was not for the applause of a company; nay, even enough who had no talent at all, but some sort of interest in that gift denied them. Welcome as the winds to a great generous tree, we flowed there, anyone who had once entered being privileged to bring or send others without limit of number. Automatically the circle spread; like a ripple on the water, irregularly, sometimes most surprisingly; and in all those years there were few groups of artists or amateurs, in all the arts about New York, who did not contribute to the free brotherhood of this fraternity; there were few lonely heart-sick strugglers who did not sooner or later find the way to this warm glowing center of hope and appreciation.

So they came; from everywhere; an astonishing congeries. And what did they? Sometimes nothing but talk, and, at ten o'clock, drink chocolate and eat little cakes. Sometimes there were a very few numbers of entertainment; and often enough a constant flow, for over two hours, of delightful, even brilliant, performance. Nothing was arranged; you arrived any time after nine o'clock, uncertain whether it would be a dull night or a full one. If there were musicians, singers, reciters, poets, present, they generally contributed with little hesitation. The audience was a keen one; affectation was quietly punished, sincerity was rewarded if it was not dull. The conversation alone was often enough a sufficient delectation; clever

people were there, and if it was not an informing talk you had with your perhaps newly introduced neighbor, it was like to be a light and witty exchange. Of course there were bores; but then the Little Salon of Eighty-sixth Street was only a human institution!

And the Dear Old Lady! So frail, so slight, yet so bravely coming forward to welcome you! Simply dressed but richly, generally in brown and black, not behind the times as to fashion, but with quaint, knitted fingerless gloves; she was alert to make you at home, to introduce you often to your best friends! to ask you to perform; and she was tactful, even a trifle pathetically so, in keeping to the shadows when things were running smoothly and did not need her urgency. I have spoken of "her children"; but that does not well express our feeling. We loved her; but it was as a companion; a friend; she was not old! She was one of us; young, ever young!

Her little parlors were lined with books; they had belonged to one of whom she often spoke, never sadly, never sentimentally, always with the slightest lowering of her voice, with an indefinable undertone that struck deeply, beautifully to the heart. A little frail woman nearing her eightieth year; slight, brown, beautiful as a leaf turned brown in its good Autumnal time; and she had once been a fresh, pink-and-white fluttering girl, all the world morning to her, and her lover claiming her. There is often enough a repulsion in old age which persists thru all effort at reverence; but not so here. I used often to think of what young womanhood, what young loverhood had been hers; and I thought how terrible the loss of the man she spoke of so often, so tenderly, must have been; yet how truly great that love must have been, since she could make, in these widowed years, a great beautiful thing of her lonely life, dying not with him, but living for him, making him immortal in the immortality she

gained for herself, an immortality that is a flow of influence thru hundreds of souls made stronger and lovelier by her.

For, having flowed to these little parlors so, having rested them there in bright and hopeful company, having been refreshed in a score of ways, having not least (nor necessarily most) of all been made to love this noble exemplar of good works; how could the scores of young artists and workers go forth but better in scores of ways? I am not naming names; but there are painters and poets, decorators and illustrators, singers and players, and what other sort of worthy strivers I know not, who to-day are honored, are successful, are well known and deservedly-known; and who when they were students, strugglers, youth poised between hope and fear on the waves of the world, went for comfort, companionship, recreation and inspiration, to the Little Salon of Eighty-sixth Street, there for them, by grace of the brave young heart of Laura Skeel Pomeroy.

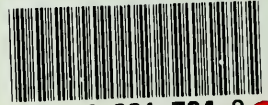
And think how much may be of importance to this whole land of America in these results. We are awaiting our artists; yes, and for the most part, holding the doors tight shut against their advent! Here was a door open. We are planning an America truly cultured; yes, and for the most part leaving our house in anything but order! Here was a house beautiful. We are lamenting the vulgarity of our wealthy class, the imitation vulgarity of our poor; yes, and what are we doing for those who bear the light of good taste? Here was a place where it sparkled, whence it radiated. Here in short was a unique, a wholly good institution, created by one frail sweet old lady, one pathetic widow strong to do, not to die, for her love; here were refreshed uncounted weary; here were kindled unknown sparks. Keen-minded, unorthodox, bravely agnostic and questioning, essentially

faithful and God-loving, she faced the inevitable decay and death without a tremor, girt with good works. The Christian may say: "Here was a life which deserved a reward in Heaven!" The agnostic may say: "Here was a life which needs none!" — I say and I know not how many lips will say with me: Blessed be the memory of The Dear Old Lady of Eighty-sixth Street.

SHAEMAS O SHEEL.

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